

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal
January 6, 2023

The President. Thank you all very, very much.

[At this point, the President waved at an audience member.]

Hi.

Two years ago, on January the 6th, our democracy was attacked. There's no other way of saying it. The U.S. Capitol was breached, which had never happened before in the history of the United States of America, even during the Civil War. A violent mob of insurrectionists assaulted law enforcement, vandalized sacred halls, hunted down elected officials, all for the purpose of an attempt to overthrow the will of the people and usurp the peaceful transfer of power.

All of it—all of it—was fueled by lies about the 2020 election.

But on this day 2 years ago, our democracy held, because "We the People," as the Constitution refers to us—"We the People" did not flinch. "We the People" endured. "We the People" prevailed.

And on this day of remembrance, joined by the Vice President and the Second Gentleman and all of you, we honor a remarkable group of Americans who embodied the best before, during, and after January the 6th, 2021.

For the first time in my Presidency, I am bestowing the Presidential Citizens Medal, one of our Nation's highest civilian honors. It recognizes, quote, "citizens of the United States of America who have performed exemplary deeds of service for their country or their fellow citizens." End of quote.

In a few moments—in a few moments—the full citation of their exemplary deeds will be read by a Military Aide. But this is who these people, these extraordinary Americans, are.

Heroic law enforcement officers. As Congressman Bennie Thompson said—a man of immense character and honor himself—eloquently said about these officers, he said, quote: "You held the line that day. [And] what was on the line was our democracy. And history will remember your names."

And history will remember your names. They'll remember your courage. They'll remember your bravery. They'll remember your extraordinary commitments to your fellow Americans. That's not hyperbole; that's a fact. That's a fact.

And, folks, history is also going to remember your instincts to respond to do something, as you did—and as we all watched. This is the irony of it all: All America watched it—watched it on television and saw it repeated and repeated.

In the past months, we've heard you testify to the Nation about what happened that day; what you were thinking of at the time it was happening; what you're thinking now—the threats, the violence, the savageness of what happened, the trauma. All real.

And it's not exaggeration to say America owes you—owes you all—I really mean this—a debt, a debt of gratitude, one we can never fully repay unless we live up to what you did. Live up to what you did. And what you did was truly consequential. Not a joke.

If I can halt for a second and just say to you: The impact of what happened on July [January; White House correction] the 6th had international repercussions beyond what I think any of you can fully understand.

The first meeting I had of what they call the G-7—the seven leading economies in the world, democracies—I sat down—it was in February; it was in England—and I sat next to the President of France, across from the Chancellor from Germany, et cetera. And I said, "America is back." You know what the response was? Not a joke. "For how long?" "For how long?"

And I just sat there and looked. And I believe it was the Prime Minister of Italy who said it, but I can't remember for certain which of the seven—six—said it. "And what would you think, Mr. President, if tomorrow you woke up and you had a headline in the press saying that in the British Parliament, a mob had come down the hall, broken down the doors of the House of Commons, police officers were killed or died, the place was vandalized in order to overthrow the election of the Speaker of the House—a Prime Minister's election?"

Think about it. Think about it. What would we think if we heard that news today, if any other leading democracy in the world went through this?

So, folks, what these people, and the people representing those who couldn't be here because they gave their lives for this, did is incredibly consequential. And that's not political talk. That's a historical fact.

Officer Daniel Hodges, Metropolitan Police Department, a Virginia National Guardsman. Eight years—eight years—on the beat. And his first time inside the Capitol was on January the 6th. Sprayed with poison. Pinned and crushed. Eye almost gouged out.

But he didn't break. After it was over, he was asked what he'd been fighting for. This is a local guy, an ordinary American. And he gave a simple, straightforward answer. "What were you fighting for?" His spontaneous answer was: "Democracy." That's what he knew he was fighting for. He wasn't a scholar. He wasn't a historian. He was a red-blooded American. He was fighting for democracy.

Former Metropolitan Police Officer Michael Fanone. We've become friends. I've known him—I've come to know him more. Twenty years on the job. A veterans narcotics investigator. At a moment of crisis, he was asked to do undercover work elsewhere, but he answered the crisis call of our Nation at the Capitol. And you answered, Michael. You always did.

He was beaten. Beaten. Not pushed around, beaten. And he was tased, called a traitor, as the mob shouted, if you remember, "Kill him with his own gun." "Kill him with his own gun."

But he defended our democracy with absolute courage. And ever since, he's spoken out forcefully to make sure people are held accountable, because he knows it could happen again. There's no guarantees, except us, all of you.

Private First Class Harry Dunn from the United States Capitol Police. Fourteen years on the force. On that day, he was outside Speaker Pelosi's office. He stood guard protecting fellow officers who were already injured. He was fighting back insurrectionists across the Capitol while being called the vilest racist names.

His own Congressman, a true constitutional scholar, Jamie Raskin, who couldn't be here today as he recovers from cancer treatments, but he called—he wanted me to say the following, and I wrote it down: "Officer Harry Dunn acted with remarkable courage and valor to defend both our institutions and our people." He went on to say, "Generations to come will think of him and these officers and thank them for their service." End of quote.

Officer Carol [Caroline; White House correction] Edwards. Five years on the force, U.S. Capitol Police. On the front lines of the mob's first surge, as she stood there, she said—and I'm not—I hope I'm correctly quoting you. You said, "It looked like a movie." "It looked like a movie." Sometimes in crisis, things look surreal. "It looked like a movie." Knocked unconscious with traumatic brain injury, she got back up to help hold the line.

The granddaughter of two proud military veterans, she says it was her job to, quote, "protect America's symbol of democracy," end of quote: that building.

Sergeant Aquin—excuse me.

Medal recipient U.S. Capitol Police Sergeant Aquilino A. Gonell. Aquilino.

The President. Aquinino [Aquilino; White House correction]. Thank you, pal. [Laughter] I'm glad you know your name. [Laughter] He can call me President "Bidden" from now on if he wants. [Laughter]

A proud immigrant from the Dominican Republic. Sixteen years on the force. Like my son, an Iraqi war veteran with the United States military—the United States Army—who described January 6 as something from a "medieval battle."

Trying to keep insurrectionists from entering the tunnel entrance on the lower West Terrace as he got punched, blinded with a laser, speared with an American flagpole with an American flag on it, the flag he swore to defend, he stood tall in the breach with a deep and abiding love demonstrated for his country.

Officer Eugene Goodman, an Army veteran who put himself at risk as a rifle squad leader conducting combat patrols to identify explosives in Baghdad. He came home—he came home—to guard the U.S. Capitol for the last 15 years.

On January 6, he risked his own safety to distract a charging group of insurrectionists. He said his duty is to serve and protect. And he said, that day, he was just doing part—he was "protecting." And he did. He protected.

To all of you, I know this honor is bittersweet. On that day, more than 140 law enforcement officials suffered physical injuries, and untold numbers are suffering from psychological toll of that day as well. PSD doesn't also—only occur in the military battlefield.

Others are gone forever. And I said earlier, if I can hold a minute here—I said earlier: You know, for those who lost someone on that day, they're proud as the devil that their kin are being honored, but, boy, is it hard. I know how proud I am when my son Beau is honored on the anniversary of his death as a consequence of burn pits in Iraq. But it brings everything back like it happened that moment.

So, to all the families here, all the families here who lost someone, my heart aches for you. And I want to thank you for having the courage to be here today so the rest of America can know what your kin did, including Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who will be receiving this medal posthumously. A veteran of the New Jersey Air National Guard. Thirteen years on the Capitol Police force as an officer. He lost his life after protecting the citadel of democracy.

We're joined by his family today, whom my wife Jill and I met when we paid our respects in the Capitol Rotunda 2 years ago. I know you're proud of the honor being bestowed on Brian, but I also know this difficult moment, because it brings back everything as if it happened this very day.

But thank you for being here. And thank you for letting us remember Brian. Thank you.

Capitol Police Officer Howard Liebengood, who's receiving this medal posthumously. Howard's dad was a good friend of mine. I served with his dad. His dad was Sergeant at Arms in the United States Senate, chief of staff for Republican Senators. We were genuinely friends.

Officer Liebengood patrolled the grounds outside the Senate Office Building on January 6. He worked nearly nonstop in the days that followed. And he lost his life after protecting the democratic institutions he'd learned to revere growing up.

His family, his widow Serena, they're here today. Serena has honored Howard's memory by advocating for, quote, "positive change on mental health issues for his fellow law enforcement officers" and other reforms, help them cope with the crises they encounter.

Metropolitan Police Officer—Department Officer Jeffrey Smith, who will be receiving this medal posthumously as well. He was part of the first line of officers who entered when the Capitol was breached. Assaulted many times, the last time with a metal pipe. After his death, his widow, along with—Erin—his widow Erin, along with many others, worked tirelessly to pay—to pass, in the Congress, the Public Safety Officer Support Act, which I signed into law last summer.

The law recognizes death by silent injury, like Officer Smith's and Officer Liebengood, so future families of public safety officers who die in the wake of traumatic circumstances will get the benefits they deserve. It's long overdue.

Today is a ceremony to honor heroes of January 6, but we also recognize the late U.S. Capitol Police Officer Billy Evans. His family is with us today.

Three months after January 6, while they were still cordoning off the Capitol because threats these—by these sick insurrectionists continued to be profligated on the internet—again, all of America saw what happened, what—Officer Evans was killed defending a checkpoint you had to go through to get up to the Capitol, because of these God-awful, sick threats that continue to move forth. And the whole world saw it.

It's just hard to believe. It's hard to believe it could happen here in America.

When I was a 29-year-old kid, got elected to the Senate, came down here to be sworn in I was—after I was 30, the idea that if you told me—

[A video of the President speaking could be heard playing from the audience.]

[Laughter] That I could hear my own voice—*[laughter]*—I would be amazed.

But all kidding aside, think about it. Think about this.

Jill and I also met the family at the Rotunda to pay our respects.

And I was honored to sign into law a bill awarding the Congressional Medal—Gold Medal to those who protected the Capitol on January 6 and to honor Officers Sicknick, Evans, Liebengood, Smith for their sacrifices. These officers are the best among us.

And we're also honored to be joined by many other members of the various law enforcement agencies here today and who were here on that January 6th. We thank all of them as well.

I want to thank you all for your service, your strength, your courage, and, I know it's a corny thing to say, but your patriotism.

Joining these law enforcement officer honorees are five other public servants. Ruby Freeman and her daughter Shaye Moss—her grand—where are you guys? Sitting up there, right in the middle. They were election workers from Atlanta, Georgia.

Ruby, who for years has taken time away from running her own business to work an election season to honor voting rights, the heritage of her beloved city. Her daughter Shaye, who learned

from her grandmom how older generations of her family fought so hard to even get the right to vote. So Shaye decided to become a full-time election worker to help the elderly, the disabled, the students exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Both of them were just doing their jobs until they were targeted and threatened by the same predators and peddlers of lies that would fuel the insurrection. They were literally forced from their homes, facing despicable racist taunts. But despite it all, Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss found the courage to testify openly and honestly for the—to the whole country and the world about their experience to set the record straight about the lies and defend the integrity of our elections.

Ruby and Shaye, you don't deserve what happened to you, but you do deserve the Nation's eternal thanks for showing the dignity and grace of "We the People." Presumptuous of me, but I'm so proud of you both. So proud of you both.

Albert Schmidt, a former Republican city commissioner in Philadelphia, who spent a decade overseeing nonpartisan counting of votes. But like so many other local election workers, in 2020, he was harassed and threatened as he did his job faithfully. He did not bend, he did not bow, he did not yield to the political threats and pressure.

And he's so trusted by both political parties that the new Democratic Governor of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro, appointed him as Pennsylvania's secretary of state—a Republican—to ensure that—the integrity of the elections. That's a high compliment. His character and his commitment speak volumes of "We the People."

That's what we also see in Jocelyn Benson, twice elected Michigan's secretary of state to protect the sacred right to vote and have that vote counted fairly. That's what she did in 2020 when she oversaw a record number of Michiganders turn out to vote in that election, only to find an armed mob—an armed mob—outside of her home on Christmas Eve when she and her son were decorating their Christmas tree inside.

But she refused to back down. She'd done her duty. She had kept her oath. Full of integrity, she is a true leader in our Nation. And thank you, thank you, thank you for what you've done. I mean it.

And finally, Rusty Bowers, a former Republican speaker of the house in the State of Arizona. When I met him today, I said, "I hope I'm not hurting your reputation." *[Laughter]* Where are you, Rusty? See, he's hiding behind you. He's able to do that, you know. *[Laughter]*

Rusty, we may not agree on all things, but we agree on what this country is about though. We agree that public service is not without—is not about what you're willing to do to win, it's about what you're willing to lose over. What you're willing to lose over.

Rusty put his obligation to the Constitution of this country ahead of everything when he refused intense political pressure to decertify the 2020 election results. His courage is probably the reason why he's lost his primary last year.

Rusty, you're an example—is a demonstration to every young man and woman thinking about entering politics about what integrity—what integrity—is all about. And I'm not exaggerating. Thank you, thank you for your integrity and your honor.

So, folks, my fellow Americans, I want you to give one round of applause again for today's recipients of the Presidential Citizens Medal. Patriots who have performed exemplary deeds in the service to this great Nation.

And let me close with this. Eighty-two years ago, on this very day in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union Address that became known as his famous "Four Freedoms" speech, as he defined America's place in the world.

He reminded the American people of, quote, the "strength from the things which have been done to make its people conscious of their individual stake in the preservation of democratic life in America. Things that have toughened the fiber of our people, renewed their faith, and strengthened their devotion to the institutions we make ready to protect." End of quote.

Eighty years ago—after that speech, on this day 2 years ago, we were reminded about the most fundamental of things: democracy itself. As I've said before, we face an inflection point in our Nation's history. On January 6, it's a reminder that there's nothing guaranteed about our democracy.

Remember learning in undergraduate school, high school that every generation is required to earn it, defend it, protect it? I was a Senator for a long time. I was Vice President, then President. I'd have to tell you: I began to think, looking back on it, that it was just permanent, the United States. It just was eternal. Nothing would happen.

That's why I was so pleased to see Democrats and Republicans work together to pass the Electoral Count Reform Act that I just signed into law to protect the will of the people and the pass—peaceful transfer of power.

And defending and protecting our democracy also means that despite our differences of opinion, we must say clearly, with a united voice, that there is no place—none—zero, zero place in America for voter intimidation—zero, never—and political violence. They are completely contrary to the notion of democracy.

You know, America is a land of laws and not chaos, a nation of peace and not violence. We're not a land of kings and dictators, autocrats and extremists. As we see in today's honorees, we're a nation of "We the People" that toughen our fiber, renew our faith, and strengthen our cause.

Just remember who in God's name we are. We're the United States of America. Not a joke. We're the United States of America. And there's nothing—there is nothing—there has never been a single thing we've set our mind to that we've failed to accomplish. There's nothing beyond our capacity if we act together and remember who in God's name we are.

So God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. And may God protect those who stand watch over our democracy.

I now have the opportunity and the great honor to award the medals to these incredible individuals and their representatives.

Lieutenant Commander Shields, would you come and please read the citations?

[Lt. Cmdr. Adam M. Shields, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Col. Raymond J. Roe, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President.]

The President. Well, as I said at the outset, this is warranted—in some sense, it's overdue—but also incredibly difficult for the families and particularly the families of those who lost a hero defending our democracy. And—but I tell you, people who will go through, unfortunately, similar losses are going to look at you all and say, "That's the grace and dignity that I want to display."

So, really, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I want to thank you again for your service and sacrifice. And may God bless your families. May God protect our troops. Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; President Emmanuel Macron of France; former Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany; and Prime Minister Mario Draghi of Italy. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

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